

**TESTIMONY OF ERICA E.BROMLEY, MSW
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**Regarding
HB 5357: AN ACT CONCERNING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM
(WITH PROPOSED REVISION TO THE DEFINITION OF "CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM")**

Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann and members of the Education Committee: My name is Erica Bromley and I am the Director of the Manchester Youth Service Bureau, which is one of 102 YSBs serving 145 communities throughout CT. In addition, I am the Vice President of the CT Youth Services Association as well as a Team Leader for the Children's Committee Kids Report Card, led by Senator Bartolomeo and Representative Urban. I have had the pleasure of specifically working on the Chronic Absenteeism Indicator since the Report Card's inception.

I am speaking today in favor of HB 5357, An Act Concerning Chronic Absenteeism, which requires school districts to not only track chronic absenteeism, but requires the creation of Student Attendance Review Teams. I am in support of this bill, but with important proposed revision in language in regards to the definition of Chronic Absenteeism. Leaders on this topic, both nationwide and within our State Department of Education, define "Chronically Absent" as any student who is absent for 10% or more of the school year (opposed to using the 18 day threshold). This distinction affects when a child can and should get services. With this definition, missing 10% of school is a threshold where research clearly shows the negative impact of this lost educational time. In addition, the definition must include BOTH excused and unexcused absences, which mirrors national standards and current State guidelines.

Chronically Absent students who are not identified earlier are more likely to fail classes, drop out of school or become involved in the juvenile justice system. Additionally, it negatively affects other students in the classroom when chronically absent students return behind in their work. Minority students, those receiving free lunch and those with disabilities are also chronically absent at a much higher rate which mirrors the state's disparities apparent in our achievement gap data.

Intervention is key, and the earlier the better. By using the right data and identifying students, schools can address issues causing chronic absence at an earlier point in time. The first step is to look at school building data to track what individual students are struggling with attendance and then begin to address why it is happening. There is no standard answer to why and how children become chronically absent, but discovering those reasons is the only way to address those individualized issues.

This bill also calls for the creation of School Attendance Review Teams, a key component in addressing student needs. In Manchester, the School Attendance Review Board has been in existence for over 5 years, however, a truancy board existed for many years prior. The SARB, as it is referred to, is comprised of representatives from the school system, both central office and individual school representatives, the Youth Service Bureau, community based mental health agencies, DCF, and others. Those pertinent to individual cases are also invited in on a case by case basis. The SARB works together to solve attendance issues as well as behavior issues that often accompany chronic absence through the use of available resources and other creative intervention strategies. An individualized plan is put into place for each family which often includes assigning a case manager from either the Youth Service Bureau or the School District's Outreach Office. The Manchester school system has created new and updated policy to address school absence through the use of a continuum dependent on the number of absences, with each level of absences requiring a different intervention option.

This model has helped create a more streamlined system of identification, communication, and provision of interventions. What has resulted is a comprehensive partnership based effort to support the needs of families whose children struggle with attendance in a way that addresses individual family needs. Case managers are able to support families in carrying out recommendations from the Board and are also able to work individually with the children in an effort to transition them back to full school attendance.

I would also like to suggest that this Bill include language that community based agencies be a part of the proposed Attendance Teams. This will not only allow for a larger menu of available service options, but will streamline the referral process for the families.

In closing, the work being done at the local level in communities such as Manchester, as well as work at the State level, most notably with the Kids report Card, is an important beginning to addressing a disturbing trend with profound effects. The issue of Chronic Absenteeism is serious, but it is also one that can be addressed.

I applaud the effort of this Committee in its creation of this legislation and hope that the language can be modified to better fit with national and State standards and best practices. Thank you for your time. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.